▼ ▼ ▼ CHAPTER 3

Resistance to Enslavement

In this chapter we will look at how Africans reacted to enslavement. At this point, however, we must start talking exclusively about African-Americans rather than Africans. The trade of enslaved Africans continued well into the 1800s, even after it was illegal, but most of those who were enslaved were born in America. So most were then American by birth as well as African by ethnic background.

From the early 1700s until around 1790, African-Americans made up a majority of the state's population. However, between about 1790 and 1820 whites held a slight majority. By 1820 whites were once again a minority because of an invention. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. The gin allowed seeds to be easily removed from the green seed type of cotton that grew inland. This made cotton profitable there, so cotton growing moved inland. Growers used more and more African-Americans to work the new inland fields and run the plantations. Numbers increased. African-Americans were a majority of the state's population from 1820 until 1930. By the Civil War, about 400,000 African-Americans were enslaved in the state. They were almost 60 percent of the state's population. However, most whites were not owners of those who were enslaved. Out of roughly 300,000 white residents, about 37,000, or a little more than one in ten, were owners.

Conditions

Before we look at resistance, we must know something about what it was like to be enslaved. It was not the same everywhere. Those who were enslaved in South America, in the Caribbean Islands, and in North America faced different situations. Enslaved people grew different crops in each of these areas. Each area had different laws. Even within the American South many differences existed. Enslavement in South Carolina was somewhat different from Virginia. Even within our state, conditions varied from plantation to plantation. There were also differences between life on the plantations and life in urban areas like Charleston. In a very real sense, each enslaved person's situation was unique.

In spite of these differences, all enslaved African-Americans shared a common situation. Legally, they were property. They belonged to the owner, or "master" or "mistress," to use the terms of the day. Those who were enslaved had no civil rights, except the right not to be killed without good reason. Even this was no guarantee. A master or any white person who killed an enslaved person could tell the court that he was only protecting himself. The law was always on the other side if you were enslaved. Your family could be separated anytime your owner chose to sell any of you. Even marriages were not legally binding. If you got "out of line," you could be whipped with a lash. "Out of line" included almost anything. "Impudence" or "insolence" were typical offenses. This meant that you did not show proper respect. That could be something as simple as saying the wrong word or giving the wrong look at the wrong time. In other words, you were always in danger of physical punishment. Sometimes enslaved African-Americans were even made to punish each other.

Owners sometimes put some African-Americans in charge of other African-Americans. More often lower class whites worked as supervisors. They were all called "drivers" or "overseers" because they saw over the work that was to be done. These overseers also had the power to punish those under them.

In addition, as enslaved people resisted the masters' efforts to control them, the legislature passed

more restrictive laws. The laws gave the masters more control. This made life even more difficult.

Even under the best of conditions, the lives of those who were enslaved were hard. Enslaved people had little control over what they did each day. Because the purpose of plantations was to make money, even "kind" masters would try to get as much work as possible out of those they enslaved.

Enduring Enslavement

When you think about this, you might wonder why all enslaved African-Americans did not revolt. Masters liked to think that those they enslaved were and content. Masters liked to think that only a few enslaved people were really unhappy. You will even hear some people say this kind of thing today.

The evidence shows that this was not true. No human readily accepts being deprived of freedom. As Americans we believe that "liberty" is an inalienable human right. Even if the person who "owns" another human tries to be kind, the human spirit demands freedom. No one wants to live in a cage, no matter how "nice" it is. As you will see, although you may hear stories about kind and gentle masters and mistresses, many were extremely cruel. Those who lived under their harsh rule had much to endure. They endured both physical and mental pain.

In a sense we could argue that this endurance was one kind of contribution. Most enslaved African-Americans did not rebel openly. By enduring and doing the hard work every day of their lives, they contributed to the wealth of the state. Of course, they also created the wealth of the white masters and mistresses. The price of that wealth was ever so high.

Resisting Enslavement

This does not mean that those who endured were always "docile," or timid. Certainly the masters had most of the power on their side. They had "slave patrols," militia troops, weapons, laws, and courts. But those who were enslaved, like "Brer Rabbit," had ways of improving their chances a little. In fact life on the plantation always involved a kind of "cat and mouse" game. Masters were searching for the best way to get what they wanted. Enslaved African-Americans often tested the limits of their master's control. Enslaved people found ways to resist the master's will. In this way enslaved people showed their humanity, the desire of the human spirit to be free. They were unwilling to let the masters define who they were.

This kind of resistance is another kind of contribution. It helped set the stage for eventual legal freedom. Resistance showed that enslavement was neither natural nor desirable. If those enslaved had complied totally with their masters' rules, the job of the antislavery movement would have been much harder. Emancipation might have come much later.

Different Forms of Resistance

How did enslaved African-Americans resist masters' efforts to control them? There were many ways, ranging from small, quiet gestures to large, complicated, and terrifying revolts.

First, African-Americans did things that reminded them of Africa. By holding on to their African customs, they were saying several things to themselves and perhaps to their masters. "We may be enslaved, but we are not just slaves. We have some control over our lives. Our roots are worth preserving." One example of this was the use of drums. Drums were an important part of African life. They were used in many ways, ranging from the funeral ceremony to the joyous dancing that so amazed their white owners. Enslaved Africans in early South Carolina made and beat drums as they had done in Africa. The powerful rhythmic beating reminded them of "home." However, it did more. It caused many whites to worry. Were the drums sending messages? Were the drums inspiring the drummers with a sense of power? Whites could not be sure. After the uprising called the Stono Rebellion, the colonial government banned the use of drums by those who were enslaved. We will look at drums again in a later chapter.

We know from the records of masters and mistresses in South Carolina that those they enslaved often frustrated them. Masters complained that their enslaved African-Americans were "lazy" or slow to learn. They complained about broken farm tools. They complained of irresponsibility and forgotten instructions. In short, those who were enslaved seemed to be hindering the operation of the farm or plantation or household in every way possible. Masters sometimes wondered whether enslaved people really were this way or were just "acting." Usually the masters de-

cided it was not acting. If masters admitted it was acting, they would be saying that those they enslaved were extremely intelligent. Admitting that would make it harder to keep these people enslaved. In addition nobody likes to admit they are being conned.

Some masters understood that those they enslaved were skilled at resisting their will. If a person is enslaved, why should she or he work hard or help the master make money unless she or he gained some benefit? The smart thing was to do just enough to stay out of real trouble. So the master might try to reward "good" behaviors. The master might give the enslaved person more time off. The enslaved person might get a "hand-me-down" item of clothing. She or he then had to decide if more effort was worth the reward. Since African-Americans were individuals, some did work harder for these small rewards. Others only pretended. In either case the relationship was almost always filled with tension.

Other forms of resistance were more open and aggressive. Taking things that belonged to the master or other whites was one way of striking back. Masters complained of this so much that the state passed a law in 1722 to deal with the "robbing of hen-roosts" and the theft of corn and rice. No doubt hunger was the main cause. What was stealing in the eyes of the master was not stealing in the eyes of those who were enslaved. From their point of view, they worked hard for very little. Anything they could add to this was just a way of easing the unfairness of their situation.

In the early years, enslaved Africans were allowed to keep horses and other animals. The authorities stopped this practice when they realized that some enslaved people were taking horses and changing the brands so their owners could not identify them. Enslaved people sometimes sold or traded horses and other goods for profit. Some even sold stolen goods to whites so they would not have to risk being caught with the goods.

African-Americans were also forbidden to have boats or canoes. The authorities feared that access to boats as well as horses might make it easier for African-Americans to plan revolts. By traveling longer distances than they could on foot, they could meet and plot with other enslaved people.

Running away was a way of "stealing" oneself. "Fugitives," "runaways," or those who escaped from their plantations were a serious problem for South Carolina masters. As long as the enslaved person was gone, the master was deprived of labor. The runaway was also experiencing the sensation of being free. One South Carolina master complained in his diary about someone who had run away for the third time. As a result the master had "lost" almost a year's worth of work. He added that losing work at this rate was causing him to lose money.

As we have noted, most runaways were men. But one Palmetto state master had a fifty-year-old female who was "on the run" for over a year. One group of runaways built a camp in the middle of some thick bushes and underbrush deep in the woods. They used this hideaway as their base camp as they took livestock and food from farms in the area.

Runaways who stayed away for months or years were rare. There were at least two reasons. First, whites assumed that any African-American roaming the countryside was a runaway. "Slave patrols," as they were called, were on the roads all the time and used dogs to track their quarry. Whites in these patrols received rewards for catching runaways. Eventually hunger might force runaways to approach a house or barn. If seen, they were sure to be pursued. Second, life on the run was lonesome as well as hard. Separation from loved ones was hard to endure forever. So most runaways came back on their own. They then faced whatever punishment the master chose to inflict.

Most runaways fled to the cities, hoping to avoid notice. On the other hand, some fairly large groups of fugitives, usually called "Maroons," lived in freedom in the swamps and mountains. Some remained free for long periods. In 1861, authorities found one such group near Marion in a swamp. They had apparently been there for many months.

The most extreme form of resistance was open violent rebellion. Rebellions were a part of the South Carolina scene from the very beginning. Rebellion dates back to the Spanish explorers who came to what is now South Carolina in 1525, nearly a century and a half before the English arrived.

Sometimes violence was self-directed. Some of those facing enslavement preferred to kill themselves rather than lose freedom. By their deeds they were saying "give me liberty or give me death" long

Sketch of an enslaved African attempting to flee in the New World and being caught by white soldiers. Courtesy of William Loren Katz collection, care of Ethrac Publications, 231 W. 13th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10011.

before Patrick Henry was saying those words. Suicide was relatively rare, but it did happen. Suicide was most likely to happen early in enslavement. One such case occurred in 1807 when two boatloads of Africans newly arrived in Charleston starved themselves to death. One reason those enslaved were chained to the decks of ships was to keep them from jumping overboard. Many would rather drown than be enslaved.

Whites were especially afraid that enslaved Africans would poison them. Africans were often familiar with the powers of certain plants, for good or ill. A little experimenting could show them which American plants had harmful effects. A cook had many chances to poison the master or his family. South Carolina law made this a capital crime. Conviction meant the death sentence. Even teaching secrets of poisonous plants was a crime.

Fire was another available and effective weapon. Arson, the deliberate setting of a fire to destroy property, was hard to prove. Whites feared it. Sometimes enslaved people destroyed crops. They could target any property belonging to a master. This included homes and other buildings in the city of Charleston. Over the years Charleston suffered several major fires. As long as enslaved people lived there, whites suspected them to be the cause. Charlestonians convicted enslaved African-Americans, whether guilty or not, of arson in several Charleston fires. The punishment was either death or being deported. In 1754 for example, a woman named Sacharisa was burned at the stake for setting fire to her owner's house in Charleston. In the mid-1820s, a series of fires led to a virtual panic in the city. Several enslaved African-Americans were convicted and executed for setting them.

The most dramatic form of resistance and most frightening to whites was mass rebellion. You may

have read about two such events in South Carolina, the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and the Denmark Vesey revolt of 1822. These are the most famous. But there were others. None of them were on the scale of Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia in 1831, much less the massive revolt on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in the 1790s. In fact, when we look at the long history of enslavement in South Carolina, we may wonder at how few revolts and attempted revolts there were.

There may well have been revolts about which we have no record. But if only a few took place, it would not be surprising. This is because the chances of success were very slim. Those in rebellion might gain the upper hand at first. In the long run, however, the power and organization of the whites, with the government on their side, were too great. So when a revolt was attempted, things became worse, not better. The best example of this is the most serious revolt in the 1700s, the Stono Rebellion. When it was over, the colony's Assembly passed the Slave Code of 1740. It tightened controls and put harsher penalties in place. Let us take a closer look at this event.

Sketch of an escaped African-American who is hiding in the swamps and ready to defend himself from whites who would recapture him. Courtesy of William Loren Katz collection, care of Ethrac Publications, 231 W. 13th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10011.

The Stono Rebellion

A careful study of the Stono Rebellion of 1739 suggests some answers to questions we might ask about rebellions in general. For instance, why did revolts happen when they did? Was 1739 a good time for enslaved African-Americans in the state to think about an uprising?

Those who were enslaved probably often thought about revolt. Some never went beyond thought. They must have made their plans over a long period. They waited for the best time to act. We will never know how many such plans were made but not carried out because those making the plans decided that "discretion was the better part of valor." They knew failure would cost them their lives. They knew it would make things worse for those still living. Picking the right time was important.

The late 1730s seemed to be a "good" time. Why? First, in the decade of the 1730s, some 20,000 Africans were brought into South Carolina. This doubled their number in the state. The result was a two to one ratio of blacks to whites. As we might expect, many whites were worried about this. They had good reason. At this time one extra "contribution" African-Americans were making to South Carolina was to make whites very nervous.

Second, England and Spain were at war. This meant that the English colony of South Carolina and the Spanish colony of Florida were in a hostile mood toward each other. From their base at St. Augustine, the Spanish were planning ways to threaten their English neighbors to the north. One of these ways, which the Spanish king had authorized, was to encourage enslaved African-Americans in Carolina to escape to Florida. In the months before the Stono Rebellion, several small groups of African-Americans escaped and headed toward Florida. They were obviously aware of the Spanish invitation. Some made it to St. Augustine. Some were caught and released. At least one was executed.

Finally, a new law was to go into effect on September 29, 1739. It required all white men to carry firearms to church on Sundays. The Assembly had taken this action because of the fear that enslaved people might use their time off from work on the Sabbath to start a revolt. Those who were enslaved had heard about this new law. They realized it would reduce future chances.

Early on Sunday morning, September 9, 1739, about twenty enslaved men gathered near the Stono River, about 20 miles from Charleston. Many of them were from the Angola region of Africa, which meant that they probably spoke the same native language. Their leader was named Jemmy. They took guns and ammunition from a store nearby, killing the two storekeepers. Then they headed south, urging others to join them. As their numbers grew, they looted and burned several houses. They killed some of the white residents. As their confidence and enthusiasm grew, some began to beat drums and chant about gaining liberty. This drew more enslaved people to join them from nearby plantations. For the moment they were no longer enslaved. They were rebels engaged in revolution.

By coincidence, William Bull, the colony's Lt. Governor, was returning to Charleston from Beaufort that day. Around eleven o'clock he and his aides suddenly came upon the procession. By now the rebels must have numbered between fifty and 100. They charged the Lt. Governor's party. Being mounted on horses, Bull and his aides escaped. If the rebels had killed Bull, the rest of the story might have been very different. Bull alerted whites in the area. Then he went on to Charleston and raised a larger force. Meanwhile the rebels stopped near the Jacksonboro ferry and waited for others, hearing their drums, to join them.

Around four o'clock that afternoon an armed and mounted troop of whites rode into the rebel camp. Those rebels who had guns fired and began reloading. Unarmed rebels tried to escape. The whites dismounted and fired a volley into the main group of rebels, killing fourteen. Several more were surrounded and captured. They were briefly questioned as to their intentions. Some were able to convince the whites that they had been forced to join the rebels. They were released. The rest were shot.

More than twenty whites and about the same number of blacks died in the rebellion. At least thirty rebels had escaped in a group and were still at large. Some who had fled the battle were hiding out alone. Still others were trying to get back to the plantation. The group that remained at large posed a danger to whites. So in the next several days, a massive manhunt was conducted. Even with all of the militia units on duty, cornering the main body of rebels some thirty miles farther south took a week. In the battle that followed, most of the rebels fought to their deaths. However, some escaped. Whites in the area could not rest easily for several more months. Rebels were still being captured the next spring. One remained at large for three years.

The Stono Rebellion failed. What if it had succeeded? Had Bull not been on the road, it might have been successful. With more time, hundreds, even thousands, of South Carolina African-Americans might have rallied around this small band of rebels. What if they had marched all the way to St. Augustine? We do not know what the Spanish authorities would have done with them. With this many arriving all at once, could the Spanish have reenslaved them all? This might have been the beginning of a long lasting, even permanent, African-American community in Florida. White Carolinians might have rethought their notion of building a colony with enslaved labor. Whites might have turned instead to the slower, but safer, method of luring other European immigrants to the colony. There was one such plan, called the "township plan." It was rejected in favor of continuing to use enslaved labor. Enslavement would probably have survived. However, with much smaller numbers of enslaved people, the idea of setting them free might not have seemed so drastic. The Civil War, the bloodiest war in the nation's history, might not have been necessary. In short, perhaps South Carolina history and the nation's history might have been very different.

Resistance in the Era of the American Revolution

Ideas about justice and freedom inspired white Carolinians to rebel against their English rulers. These ideas could be just as inspiring to African-Americans. What would happen if the enslaved people decided to join the Revolution? What if African-Americans decided to have a revolution of their own?

The British saw possible advantages in this situation. They tried to recruit enslaved African-Americans to join them in putting down the rebellion in America. In exchange for the promise of freedom, some enslaved South Carolinians fought on the British side during the American War for Independence. We will discuss this more in the chapter on military service later in the book. Other African-Americans saw the rallies held by white Carolinians to denounce the Stamp Act and other British laws and tried to join in. One group paraded through the streets of Charleston. Enslaved blacks shouting about liberty shocked whites! At least one African-American was executed for such behavior. At that time, liberty was for whites only. Another casualty may have also resulted from the unrest, but it is not certain. In 1769, an enslaved woman was burned at the stake in Charleston for poisoning her master.

By the spring of 1775, fighting had begun in Massachusetts between British soldiers and colonial rebels. This caused much excitement and talk among whites in South Carolina. What would become the War for Independence was beginning. It would soon spread across the nation.

In the midst of this excitement a free African-American named Thomas Jeremiah may have carried his enthusiasm for freedom too far. It cost him his life. "Jerry," as he was known, was a fisherman and a harbor pilot. He was perhaps the richest member of his race in the colony. He was well known in Charleston for his heroic service fighting fires. In June of 1775, he was arrested for plotting rebellion. Although others who were accused of this crime confessed, Jerry did not. He was convicted and hanged. Some whites thought he was innocent. The court evidently felt it could not take the chance of letting Jerry go free. His skill as a pilot could have been used to help the British navigate into Charleston harbor and attack the city. In fact, the British tried to do this one year later. In June of 1776, a British invasion was turned back by General Moultrie's men. The outcome might have been different with the help of someone who knew the waters in the area.

Resistance in the 1800s

African-Americans continued to resist enslavement in the ways we have described until the Civil War ended. Despite continued efforts, whites never solved the problem of how to gain total control. From time to time, whites faced that most drastic type of resistance—rebellion. Two such times were July 1816 in Camden and June 1822 in Charleston.

Evidence on the Camden revolt is scarce. However, it is clear that several African-Americans planned to launch a violent attack on their masters and other whites. According to a white woman who had knowledge of the plot and from the testimony of those who were arrested, the rebels intended to take their revenge without mercy. The plot was detected, but for some time afterwards whites in the area were uneasy.

Six years later, a much larger revolt nearly took place. For several months, a group in Charleston carefully laid an elaborate plan. A free African-American named Denmark Vesey led them. The plan called for hundreds of enslaved people to escape to the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo. Africans there had been free since the successful revolt in the 1790s. This was the most ambitious and detailed revolt ever attempted in South Carolina. Native Africans and South Carolina-born African-Americans were involved. Both plantation workers and city dwellers were included. The total number was somewhere around 9,000. The plotters collected weapons. The date of the revolt was carefully chosen. It was to be Sunday, July 14, when the moon would cast almost no light. Vesey's skill in navigation, which he learned when he belonged to a ship's captain as a young man, would make the escape possible.

We will never know whether the plan would have succeeded. Two house servants who had been recruited by Vesey's men told their masters. Arrests and interrogations followed. Whites were able to identify only 100 as suspects, because Vesey refused to reveal any names. Of these, thirty-four, including Vesey, were hanged. More were sold out of the state.

In the aftermath, fear led the government of South Carolina to take several steps to prevent future revolts. First, the authorities closed the church of the Reverend Morris Brown. Several of the leaders of the plot, including Denmark Vesey, were members of the African Methodist Church. Whites assumed that rebels used the church as a meeting place. The authorities thought this was enough reason to close it.

The government took other steps as well. These included generous rewards for the informants and amendments to the state's slave code. One new law required all sailors of African descent whose ships docked at Charleston harbor to be kept isolated from the local African-American population. Whites hoped this would keep ideas about revolution away from local African-Americans. However, this shows how whites misunderstood those they had enslaved. The desire for freedom was in them already. Some, like the informants, were either loyal to masters or too afraid to revolt. Most African-Americans considered the odds against escape and rebellion and chose patience and hope over boldness. They were realists. But there were always those who dreamed great dreams and had the courage to act on those dreams.

Sometimes it was just a matter of losing your temper. One example of this took place in 1824, two years after the Vesey plot. The African-Americans enslaved on the Charles Pinckney plantation reached the limit of their endurance with the white overseer, Mr. Dawsey. When Dawsey insisted that they fence in their hogs, they refused. When he had a fence built, they burned it. Then Dawsey shot two of the hogs. One man became so angry that he threatened to send Dawsey "to hell." Dawsey ordered an African-American overseer to restrain the angry man. The overseer refused. When Dawsey shot the man, other angry people chased Dawsey. Dawsey was lucky to escape with his life.

In the mid-1820s, a different kind of revolt took place in Charleston. Over several months arsonists set a series of fires in various places in the city. Investigators found flammable materials at some of the fires. This was a sure sign of arson. Arrests were made. Testimony led to several convictions and executions. But the whites could not be sure they had caught all the arsonists.

Georgetown was the site of the next threatened revolt. In 1829, a group of would-be rebels devised a plan and set a date. One of those who had been recruited betrayed the rebels. About twenty African-Americans were arrested. Many more were questioned. The investigation became so widespread that the Attorney General, James Petigru, became worried. He wrote to the Georgetown officials warning them not to hang so many people that too few workers would be left to harvest the rice crop. The next year, the legislature sent $5,000 to help pay the cost of the investigation and the security measures.

There were other rumors about revolts. Over the years many arrests were made. Whether these were actual plots or just the imaginations of fearful whites is hard to tell. One such case occurred in Columbia in 1805. Of course, none of the plots succeeded. However, when we consider them all, we can see it is a mistake to think that African-Americans willingly accepted enslavement.

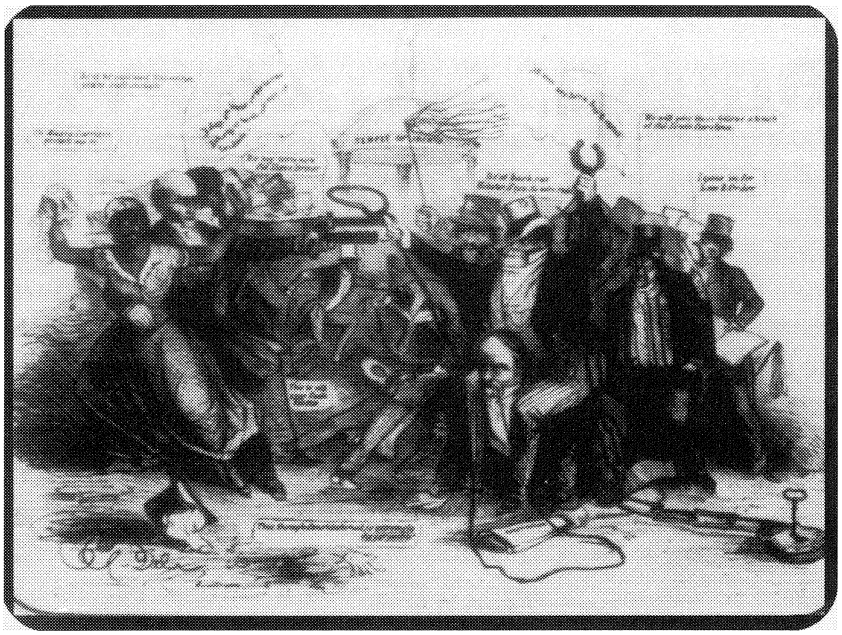
Escape to the North

If you could not rebel and were unwilling to endure the injustice of a life of enslavement, you might try to escape. While most runaways were caught, some did make it to safer places. However, even if you made it to a non-slave state in the North, you were not totally safe. Congress had passed a fugitive slave law in 1850 to help Southern masters get their "property" back. The law was passed in an effort to compromise with white Southerners and keep the nation together. Since 1793, masters had the right to cross state lines to capture runaways. But many Northern states passed "liberty laws" that made recapture impossible. So Congress tried to help the white South by promising national help in recapturing runaways. It did not work. Many Northerners refused to enforce the law. Some runaways made it to Canada. Many changed their names and started new lives.

The Abolitionist Movement

Others who escaped joined in another form of resistance. This was the "abolitionist" movement. An abolitionist was a person who hated enslavement and worked to destroy it. Whites in this movement welcomed blacks, especially if they had escaped enslavement. They could testify from personal experience about the South's "peculiar institution," as slavery was sometimes called.

One such South Carolinian was Robert Purvis. Purvis was born in Charleston to an enslaved mother and a white father. However, he was unusual because his escape was easy. His father, who was wealthy, provided for him generously. He even attended



This political cartoon, entitled "A Practical Illustration of the Fugitive Slave shows how reluctant Northerners were to enforce laws that would force them to help return African-Americans who fled the South in the 1850s. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide B-69 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION OF THE FUGITVE STATE LAW

Amherst College in Massachusetts. Purvis settled in Philadelphia, and became an active abolitionist. He was the president of the first "vigilance committee," a group that raised money to help the "underground railroad." This was not a real railroad, of course. Nor was it under the ground. Rather, it was a secret organization to help enslaved people escape to the North. It tried to protect them from being reenslaved as a result of the Fugitive Slave Law. Purvis also was one of the leading organizers of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Other South Carolina African-Americans who escaped from enslavement owed a debt to Robert Purvis and others like him who helped pave the way.

Ways to Survive Daily Life

African-Americans who lived during nearly 200 years of enslavement (1670-1865) were faced with challenges that we can barely imagine. Most did not escape. Their lives were physically much harder than those of almost anyone living today. Also, their minds and souls were burdened. Many whites who tried to control them did not treat them as human. Those who sang "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" were expressing their true feelings.

How did they survive? The short answer seems to be that most of them followed a middle path between giving in and rebelling. That is, they did not do everything the masters wanted. However, they did not risk too much by open rebellion. Each enslaved person must have found his or her own way of balancing between these extremes. In this sense, they were like most of us. They compromised between what they really wanted and what was possible. They were practical. Even so, they needed support and encouragement. They needed relief from the burdens of life. They found support and relief in their families, their religion, and in their songs and stories.

If we think of families in the traditional American sense, we may think that enslaved African-Americans hardly had families at all. Marriages among them were not legal contracts. The master might hold a ceremony when a man and woman on the plantation wanted to marry. However, this did not legally unite them. Either partner could be sold far away, breaking up the family unit. The same was true for children. Africans were not usually accustomed to the European or Christian idea of monogamy (one husband-one wife). Many masters were more interested in how many babies were produced than in who the fathers were. Finally,

the hard work kept both parents very busy. It left them so tired that sometimes they could not give their children much attention. Could strong families exist under such conditions?

Amazingly, the answer was often, though not always, yes. We can see this in the newspaper advertisements taken out by owners of runaways. Many of these ads told the reader that the runaway was thought to be headed to where his kin were living. In other words, the sale of one or two members had split the family. One member had escaped to try and put the family back together. Such strong family ties were not limited to parents and children. The ties included other relatives, like grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Ties even included non-kin who lived nearby. We call this an "extended family." This tradition has survived. We will see it in the rest of the book. African-Americans (and others) still have extended families who help share the duties and the joys of family life.

There are many benefits from this kind of family. Thinking about resistance to enslavement, one important benefit is that the grandparents and other older folks can teach the young ones about who they are. Elders can pass on the family stories and traditions, and keep the ties between the present and the past alive. This was very important for African-Americans. They were living in a world that had no respect for them or their way of life. If they did not preserve their ways, who would?

Within the family, children learned the secrets of getting along in a world in which they had no legal power. The family showed them that even though most whites showed disrespect, family members were precious to and worthy of respect from each other. The family taught them how to "put on the mask." This meant pretending to be someone different when they were with white people. Family taught them that this was not who they really were. Families took care of children's emotional and physical needs. Mothers grew vegetables in small gardens. Fathers hunted and fished to add to the little food that masters provided. Private time in the cabin with the family allowed a kind of escape from the hated roles of "slaves." Anything that could show family pride was important to them. For example, choosing a name for a new baby was a way of saying "we are a family." Some masters chose names for the black children as well as their own white children on their plantations. Masters did this to show just how much control they had. Enslaved families stubbornly resisted. They had their own secret names they used with each other.

Family was not the only source of support. Religion, music, and stories helped enslaved people survive from day to day. Each of these offered a kind of mental escape. We will look more closely at religion, music, and literature later in the book. For now, let us end this chapter with a story that African-American families frequently told as they gathered together after a long day of hard labor. After you read it, you may want to think about why this was such a favorite story.

When All Africans Could Fly

This story was remembered by a man on John's Island in the 1940s. It had been passed down for generations. The story began with the notion that long ago in Africa the people could fly. After being enslaved and brought to America, they had forgotten how. On one of the plantations where they were taken, the overseers were very cruel. The people had to work so long and hard that many died. New enslaved Africans were brought from Africa. Among them was an old man. One day he shouted something the white overseers could not understand. His words helped the people remember the power they once had. Upon hearing the words everyone got up. The old man raised his hands. The people all jumped in the air. However, they did not fall back down. Rather, they soared into the air. They soared higher and higher, until the whites could not see them anymore.

[There are a number of longer versions of this story. One of the best of these is an updated and attractively illustrated version entitled "The People Could Fly," told by Virginia Hamilton in *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). Others include "All God's Chillen Had Wings," told by Langston Hughes and A. Arna Bontemps in *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1958), "People Who Could Fly," told by Julius Lester in *Black Folktales* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969) and "Flying People" in *American Negro Folklore* by J. Mason Brewer (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1968).